



Plural Equality

Citation

Scanlon, T. M. 2014. "Plural Equality" In Reading Walzer, eds. Yitzhak Benbaji and Naomi Sussmann, 183-195. Abingdon: Routledge.

Published Version

<https://www.routledge.com/Reading-Walzer/Benbaji-Sussmann/p/book/9780415780315>

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:34309449>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#OAP>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Plural Equality

T. M. Scanlon

Michael Walzer's work in political philosophy, from *Obligations* through *Just and Unjust Wars* and *Interpretation and Social Criticism* to *Spheres of Justice*, is a marvelously rich vein of ideas and insights, which I find myself returning to time and time again. In these remarks I will focus on the conception of equality that Walzer defends in *Spheres of Justice*, and on its relation to the pluralistic conception of equality that I myself have been led to, partly under his influence.

Spheres of Justice includes three main themes, which it is useful to distinguish. The first theme, *Complex Equality*, holds that different standards of distribution are appropriate for different goods. These standards do not always require equal distribution. The standards appropriate to the distribution of educational resources, for example, may require different individuals to be treated differently, and to receive different kinds of education depending on their differing needs and talents. Such inequalities in the distribution of a good are not even *prima facie* objectionable, and do not need to be balanced by compensating inequalities in other goods. This is in contrast to what Walzer calls a doctrine of simple equality, which would require equality in overall welfare, for example, or in some basket of primary social goods.

According to complex equality, injustice occurs when *either* the distribution of a given good is not in accord with the standards appropriate for that good *or* if the distribution of one good brings with it a distribution of some other good that is not in accord with the standards for that good. So, for example, a distribution of educational

opportunities would be unjust on the latter ground if it led to objectionable inequality of income, or of political power.

The second theme, the *Meaning Dependence of Distributive Standards*, holds that the standard of just distribution for a good is determined by the meaning of that good. At least part of what this comes to is that the criteria of just distribution of a good are determined by what it is that makes that good a *good*, i.e. something that people have reason to want. For example, to identify the proper criteria for the distribution of educational resources we should consider what makes education something that people should want to have and that the society should want to provide. These will include such things as self-development, economic opportunity, and participation in civic life. The distribution of education should then be determined by what different individuals need and can use to achieve these things. This may require giving different kinds and amounts of education to different individuals.

The third theme is *the Social Dependence of Meanings*. This holds that the meaning of a good, which determines its just distribution in a society, is the meaning it has within the culture of that society. Meaning in this sense can vary from society to society, and it follows from the themes previously mentioned that when the meaning of a good varies the standards of just distribution vary with it. This relativist strand in the theory attracted much attention and criticism when *Spheres of Justice* first appeared. But it seems very plausible in some cases. The kind of education that is needed for “intellectual self-development,” for example, may vary from one society to another depending on the larger intellectual life of that society. In some cases the kind of intellectual activity that is available may require one to be proficient in Latin, in which

case education in Latin has a degree of importance that it would not have in another society in which Latin was an arcane interest. Similarly, societies vary in whether fluency in Latin is or is not necessary for participation in public life. In a society in which it is not, there might be no objection to having education in Latin available only to the children of the rich. But this would be objectionable if all public political debates were conducted in Latin, since this distribution of educational opportunity would then bring with it an inequality in political power. This much seems very plausible, even uncontroversial.

But, a strict reading of *the Social Dependence of Meanings* also implies that an unequal distribution of political power is (in itself) unjust only if it is contrary to the meaning that political power has in the society in question. If, for example, political power is seen in a certain society as the prerogative of a certain class, then distribution of political power only to that class would not be unjust according to Walzer's view.

This implication may seem implausible (indeed, it does to me), and worries of this sort, about the relativistic implications of the Social Dependence of Meanings, dominated much of the discussion of *Spheres of Justice* when it first appeared. The doctrine of Complex Equality, however, is much more plausible and appealing. So I will set aside the question of relativism for the moment, and focus instead of the idea of separate spheres of distribution. Specifically, I shall consider whether the idea of separate spheres of distribution, defined by the social meanings of the relevant different goods, is the best way of understanding a complex, or pluralistic, conception of equality.

An essential feature of demands for equality is their comparative character. Not every view that takes individuals to be morally equal is comparative in this way. So not

every such view is egalitarian. According to Robert Nozick's view in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, for example, individuals are morally equal in that they have the same rights. But these rights are non-comparative. In order to know whether someone's rights are being violated it is enough to know what has been done to him or her. It is not necessary to know how others have been treated. A demand for equality, on the other hand, is a demand to be treated in the same way as others—to have the same income as they do, or the same level of social services. Such a demand can in principle be met by giving them less as well as by giving you more, and it is this concern with what others have—this potential for “dog in the manger” demands for leveling down—that makes equality controversial. This comparative character is what gives rise to the suspicion that demands for equality, as opposed to demands simply to be made better off in some material respect, are mere expressions of envy. As Walzer observes, one of the main tasks of an egalitarian theory of justice is to answer this charge.¹ I am drawn to a pluralistic conception of equality in large part because of its ability to provide such answers. What I want to do now is to consider some of these answers, as I would give them, and to see how they correspond to the answers that would be provided by the doctrine of complex equality set out in *Spheres of Justice*.²

In order to answer the charge that genuinely comparative demands for equality are mere expressions of envy we need to provide some convincing reason for objecting not just to the level of some individuals' enjoyment of a good but to the difference between

¹ *Spheres of Justice*, p. xiii.

² The plural conception of equality that lies behind what I will say in the rest of this paper draws on my essay, “The Diversity of Objections to Inequality,” in *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and “When Does Equality Matter” (unpublished.)

this level and that of others. One way of doing this is expressed in what I call the principle of equal benefit. If an agent, say the state, has an obligation to provide a certain benefit to each member of a group, then it is objectionable if, absent some justification, it provides this benefit more fully to some than to others. Suppose, for example, that the state is obligated to provide paved streets, or trash collection, to all citizens. It may be permissible for these benefits to be provided at any or several levels: the legislature can decide how much to spend on repaving, or on frequent and convenient trash pickups, and how much to spend on other things. But it would be *prima facie unjust* consistently to provide better streets, or better garbage collection services to one neighborhood (say that occupied by members of a particular religion or ethnic group) than is provided to another. The underlying obligation in such cases—to provide a certain benefit—is not comparative. But when that obligation exists, its *differential* fulfillment is unjust.

I want now to consider how this objection to inequality might be explained within the theory advanced in *Spheres of Justice*. The requirement of equal treatment that I have described may seem independent of social meanings. But that appearance may be deceiving. First, what constitutes *equal* treatment may depend on the social meaning of the good in question. This may not be obvious in the case of streets and garbage pickups, but it becomes clearer when we consider goods such as education. As I pointed out earlier, the obligation to provide education to all may require providing quite different things to different people, depending on their needs and talents. As was also pointed out, this obligation can justifiably take different forms in different societies depending on differences in what people need education for, and how they are able to use it.

The view put forward in *Spheres of Justice* goes further, and holds that what I have been calling obligations to provide certain goods are themselves a component of the “social meaning” of those goods, and therefore socially relative. This seems true in many cases. At least within a certain range, it is open to a society to decide which services the state will provide for its citizens—whether, for example, it will provide a system of public transportation or leave this to private initiative. But once the state does take up a given role, the principle of equal benefit applies. On Walzer’s view, then, there is no need to refer to a special wrong of “unequal treatment” or “differential fulfillment of an obligation” to explain what is unjust in cases of unequal benefit of the kind I have been imagining. They are just cases in which some good—education, or garbage collection, as it might be—is being distributed in some way other than in accord with its social meaning.³

I turn now to some other grounds for objecting to inequality, and to how these objections look from the point of view of *Spheres of Justice*. One such objection appeals to the fact that people have good reason to object to social arrangements that mark them out as inferior to others. This may be only a *prima facie objection*—some social judgments of inferiority may be justified. It may be justified, for example, to deny certain signs of social respect to those who have committed terrible crimes against their fellow citizens. But the experience of being *unjustifiably* stigmatized as inferior is something that people have good reason to want to avoid.

³ I leave aside the question whether there are some obligations that belong to the state *qua* state, independent of local views of the matter. Police protection and protection against foreign aggression, for example, may fall into this category. I leave it open how much farther the list extends (and thus the extent of possible disagreement with the doctrine of social dependence.)

This provides one important objection to familiar forms of racial discrimination, and also, I would say, to caste societies, which mark some people as ineligible for important social goods simply on the basis of birth. The possibility that in a caste society such treatment might be justified by a coherent set of social meanings (a possibility that Walzer discusses⁴) raises the question of relativism, mentioned above. As I would see it, the very coherence of this set of meanings makes the evil of being condemned as inferior in such a society *worse*. But I will leave this question aside for the moment, because I want to consider another objection to inequality based on the evil of unequal status.

Objectionable inequalities in status can be produced simply by extreme forms of economic inequality. As Adam Smith observed, there is a serious objection to a society in which some people are so much poorer than others that they have to live and dress in such a way that they cannot go out in public without shame.⁵ In Walzer's version of complex equality this objection might be put by saying that in such a society one "sphere"—that of income and wealth—is allowed to dominate another sphere—that on honor, or recognition. Whether this is the best way of putting the matter or not, the objection is a sound one.

This objection allows us to see the superiority of a doctrine of complex equality over some forms of simple equality. Consider an abstract description of two societies.⁶ In both of these societies the great majority of citizens enjoy the same level of welfare, which we can assume is quite a tolerable level. In one society, however, (call it Peakville)

⁴ *Spheres of Justice*, Chapter 13.

⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Home University, 1910) pp. 351-352. Cited by Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 115.

⁶ This example was suggested to me by Larry Temkin's discussion in *Inequality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Chapter 2, although his examples differ from this one.

there are a very few people who are much, much better off. In the other society, (Valleyland) there is a group, of the same size, of people who are much, much worse off than the majority. Following Temkin, we may ask whether one of these societies is worse than the other “from the point of view of equality” or whether they are the same, judged from this point of view. In one sense, they are the same: they have the same Gini coefficient, for example. But there is one obvious objection to Valleyland, the society with a small number of (relatively) poor citizens, that does not apply to Peakville: the objection that the poorer citizens of Valleyland are likely to suffer status harm of the kind described by Adam Smith.

To assess the inequality in Peakville, on the other hand, we need to know more than my abstract description tells us. If the very wealthy citizens consist of film stars or athletes whose relative wealth derives from the eagerness of their fans to see them perform, this wealth might be unobjectionable “from the point of view of equality”—that is to say, it may not, in itself, give rise to any claim of injustice against the society. If this inequality has no other objectionable effects, then this might be a case in which inequality in income is, as Walzer says, “harmless.”⁷ But things are quite different if the small number of well-to-do people, whatever the source of their wealth, are able to control the lives of others by, for example, determining what kinds of employment will be available for them. So a second way in which inequality can be objectionable is that it can allow some people to dominate and control others.

In the language of *Spheres of Justice* this might be seen as a case in which one sphere of distribution inappropriately dominates another: a case in which the good of

⁷ *Spheres of Justice*, p. 107.

wealth tyrannizes over the good of power, or liberty. This does not seem to me the best way of putting the matter, however. The natural objection to such arrangements does not derive from a particular social meaning of the good of liberty, or the good of power, but rather from the fact that, whatever the social meanings of the goods of their society, people have good reason to want not to be controlled in this way. So in this case I am inclined to accept the doctrine of *Complex Equality* but to resist the doctrine of the *Meaning Dependence of Distributive Standards*, or at least to resist the combination of this doctrine with *the Social Dependence of Meanings*.

Another way in which inequalities can be objectionable, I would say, is by undermining the fairness of basic social institutions. Here are two familiar examples. First, when there is great inequality in family income and wealth, individuals' prospects of success in a competitive market are greatly affected by the families into which they are born. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve equality of economic opportunity. Second, great inequalities in wealth and income can undermine the fairness of political institutions. The wealthy may be much more able than others to gain political office themselves, much more able to influence others who hold office, who must be dependent on them for contributions, and much more able to influence the course of political debate and legislation.

It is an open empirical question what degree of economic equality is required by this argument—how much inequality is compatible, in a given society, with the fairness of economic and political institutions. Strict equality of income and wealth is probably not required. What is required is that even the poorer members of society have sufficient resources to compete, economically and politically, with their richer fellow citizens.

Perhaps, given the right kind of public education and the right organization of political campaigns, certain differences in income and wealth would not be harmful in this particular way. What we do know is that if there is such a combination of remedies that would be adequate for the levels of inequality that prevail in our society, we have not found it. The requirements of fairness are very difficult to satisfy with anything like the levels of income disparity that we are familiar with.

As I have stated it, this objection to economic inequality is that it undermines the *fairness* of economic and political institutions. If we were to adhere to the doctrines of *Spheres of Justice*, the objection would need to be put instead by saying that these cases were cases in which one good—wealth—dominates another—say, political power, or economic opportunity (or perhaps the goods represented by certain positions to which economic reward is attached.) The objection would be that economic inequality caused these goods to be distributed in some way other than the way required by their own social meanings. Is this a satisfactory way of putting the point?

One reason not to put it this way is that the objection to inequality that we are considering (the objection I stated in terms of fairness) would seem to be just as strong if the accepted view in the society in question was that political power properly belonged to the rich, and that the poor had no claim to it. From the point of view of fairness, as I am understanding it, this attitude—this social meaning—is objectionable in itself. On this view there would be an objection, from the point of view of equality, to reserving positions of political power for members of any group—a race or clan or religion, for example, whether or not this was brought about by one good, such as wealth, dominating

another. As in the case of a caste society, it seems that such a way of understanding the social meaning of political power would be open to direct criticism as unjust.

But this divergence between a “universalist” standard of criticism and a purely “local” one may be exaggerated. One way of narrowing it would be to note that any “social meaning” that we could recognize as a meaning of the good of political power would have to include the idea of an entitlement to issue edicts that citizens are obligated to obey—that is, that they have compelling reason to see as authoritative. And it might be argued that any social meaning that included this idea would contain within it a basis for objecting to, say, oligarchic, or class-based rule. Those outside the privileged class could reasonably ask: why should *we* obey *them*? Of course the reigning ideas in a society (a caste society, for example) could provide some answer to this question. What “localists” and “universalists” may disagree about at this point, I suppose, is what determines whether this answer is or is not a *good* one. Is this determined ultimately by whether that answer is supported by what is generally accepted in that society?

There may, however, be some advantage in looking at this issue in terms of social meanings. To see this we need to consider how the requirements of economic and political fairness are to be formulated and defended. These requirements come in formal and substantive varieties. Formally speaking, political fairness requires that all citizens have the same political rights: equal rights to vote, equal rights to speak, to run for office, and so on. Substantively, there is a further question of what they are able to do with these rights: how effectively they can use them to gain public office or influence the course of political events. Similarly, formal equality of economic opportunity is achieved if all have the same rights to participate in the market, and if candidates for positions to which

special rewards are attached are judged on their qualifications for those jobs, without discrimination, nepotism and so on. Substantive equality of economic opportunity goes beyond this, and requires that individuals who have the underlying talent have a proper chance to develop these talents into actual qualifications for positions of advantage. Fair equality of opportunity, as Rawls famously puts it, requires that

those who are at the same level of talent and ability, and have the same willingness to use them, should have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in the social system.⁸

When I said, above, that economic inequality can be objectionable because it conflicts with the fairness of economic and political institutions, the conflict I had in mind was with the substantive versions of these requirements. Given that these substantive requirements are, as I have said, extremely difficult to satisfy, it is worth asking how they are to be defended. Despite (or perhaps because of) the nearly universal lip service paid to these requirements (especially to the idea of equal economic opportunity) on the right at least as much as on the left, there is little discussion of this question of justification. So I want to consider briefly what kind of justification might be offered, and in particular whether a “social meaning” account may have something distinctive to contribute in this regard.

In the political case, the justification for substantive equality is relatively straightforward. If a political process is to issue in laws that all citizens are obligated to obey, then they need to have a role in shaping these laws, and this role is not guaranteed simply by formal equality. It requires meaningful opportunity to participate in the

⁸ *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 73.

political process. As I indicated above, this justification can naturally be stated in terms of the social meaning of power (although I expressed some doubts about that justification.)

In the economic case, the justification for equality of opportunity is not as immediate. Consider first the justification for formal equality of economic opportunity, which requires that everyone be legally entitled to participate in the economy and that candidates for jobs should be considered on the basis of their job-related qualifications. Here we can argue that if the justification for having a position to which special privileges or rewards are attached is based on the advantages that this specialization brings to the institution in question, or the economy as a whole, then a hiring officer who hires people on some basis other than job-related qualifications is misusing his or her authority. This rules out not only such things as racial discrimination but also nepotism and simply failing to take the relative qualifications of applicants into account because it would be too much work to read their dossiers.

This is, so far, a “top down” justification for equal treatment—that is, it derives ultimately from the needs of and justification for the institutional arrangements in question, including the positions of unequal reward that they involve. Claims of individual applicants to “equal consideration” are, on this account, derivative from this justification. If, in the case of racial discrimination for example, there is a further harm that individuals have a claim against, this has to be explained on some other basis, such as the one I described above in discussing objections to inequality of status.

The top-down justification for formal equality that I have just given fits well with the doctrine of complex equality, since it could be put by saying that it is part of the

“social meaning” of certain positions that they should go to people with certain qualifications. Indeed, what I have said here tracks fairly closely what Walzer says in Chapter 5 of *Spheres of Justice*, in particular his remark that equality of opportunity applies to all careers that have been turned into “offices.”

The question is whether and how this justification for formal equality of economic opportunity (in either of the two versions I have described) could be extended to cover substantive equality of opportunity as well. (For example, whether it could be extended to provide a justification for Rawls’s requirement of Fair Equality of Opportunity.) This is a serious question because, as I have said, such substantive requirements are difficult and costly to fulfill. Insofar as the “top down” argument for formal equality of opportunity appeals, at its base, to what is needed to make certain institutions function well, it may seem to support only a qualified case for substantive equality of opportunity. Achieving Fair Equality of Opportunity might improve the functioning of these institutions by increasing the size and perhaps the quality of the pool of qualified applicants. But if the guiding aim is simply that of improved institutional functioning, there is always the question of how much the increased efficiency of these institutions is worth, and whether it justifies the sacrifice of other goods. The point of diminishing returns might be reached before anything like Fair Equality of Opportunity is attained.

Within the view advanced in *Spheres of Justice*, we might bridge the gap between formal and substantive equality if we could argue that the social meaning of the “offices” in question not only requires that they be assigned to the best qualified applicants, but also that these offices should go to those members of society who have the greatest

underlying talent for such positions. (This would be parallel to the argument for substantive equality in the political case.)

I am not sure how plausible it is to claim this. An alternative argument, which seems to me more plausible, would be based not on the “meaning” of the offices in question but on that of the forms of education required to develop qualifications for these offices. The idea would be that, where offices of this kind exist, the forms of education required to develop qualification for them is a good whose meaning is that it should be distributed on the basis of native talent rather than, say, by the market. Of course, taking seriously *the Social Dependence of Meanings*, it must be recognized that this argument would apply only in those societies in which the goods of office had this particular meaning.

Stepping outside of Walzer’s framework, we might develop a parallel argument appealing to what I called above the principle of equal benefit. This argument would be that where positions exist that require special qualification and bring special benefit (monetary benefit, perhaps, and also the non-monetary benefit of interesting work and the good of exercising a developed talent), the state has an obligation to provide the kind of education necessary to develop these qualifications. Given that this is so, it must be made available equally to all who have the requisite talent, regardless of their social class, etc. Some further argument is needed for the claim that this particular good is one that the state is obligated to provide. But it seems to me at present that a “two-stage” argument of this kind offers a plausible way of stating the case for substantive equality of economic opportunity. (I call it a “two stage” argument because it does not claim that substantive

equality of opportunity is a condition on the justness of the offices in question, as Rawls seems to do in stating his requirement of Fair Equality of Opportunity.)

I believe that the objections to inequality that I have so far mentioned, which have close links to Complex Equality even though they do not coincide with it, account for most of the arguments for greater inequality that one encounters in ordinary political life—certainly for the most powerful such arguments. They do not, however, bring us to anything like a strict doctrine of the kind Walzer called simple equality—a doctrine requiring equal levels of welfare for all citizens, or for distributions of all goods that satisfy what Ronald Dworkin calls the envy test (that no one should prefer anyone else's bundle of goods to his or her own.) So it is reasonable to ask whether we have overlooked some objection to inequality that might lead one to such a view.

One might derive a general requirement of equal welfare from the principle of equal benefit by beginning with the idea that the state has a *general* obligation to provide for the overall welfare of its citizens—not just to protect them and provide certain services but to increase their overall level of well being or preference satisfaction. It would then follow, from the principle of equal benefit that the state must fulfill this obligation equally with respect to all of its citizens. Perhaps some welfare egalitarians hold such a view, but I myself do not find the idea that the state has an obligation to promote overall welfare a very plausible starting point, so I will leave this argument aside.

Neither Dworkin nor Rawls starts from this premise. The rationale for their egalitarianism seems to lie rather in ideas of what I will call equal claim to resources. In Dworkin's case the rationale for his mythical auction is that the participants have all

arrived on an uninhabited island at the same time, and have the same claims to its resources.⁹ In Rawls's case, the parties to his Original Position are representatives of the cooperating members of a society, that is to say, the members whose cooperation *produces* the goods the just division of which is in question. It is in virtue of this role that they have a claim on the goods in question, and their symmetrical position in the Original Position reflects the fact that they are assumed to have an equal claim.

To support this claim of equality in an actual society, one would need to defend the idea that its citizens, as co-producers, have equal claims to the fruits of their cooperation, and this claim might be questioned. It might be claimed that the contributions of different citizens are not equal, and that their shares should reflect this, perhaps by being divided according to their marginal contributions. Rawls attempts to rebut such objections at various points in *A Theory of Justice*.¹⁰ Assuming this can be done successfully, the form of substantive equality that this argument naturally leads to is equality of resources—equality in primary social goods, as opposed, say, to equality of welfare, which would be more plausible if one were proceeding from the principle of equal benefit in the way I briefly described above.

In closing, want to consider what the accounts of equality that I have been discussing have to say about the increasing inequality in our society. This has two aspects. The first is the plight of the very poor, who may be without employment, or even the prospect of it, without proper health care, and perhaps even without adequate housing. Any of the views I have been considering would support strong objections to this situation. What I want to focus on, however, is what these views have to say about the

⁹ See *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) pp. 66ff.

¹⁰ See, for example, §§47-49.

other aspect of contemporary rising inequality, namely the widening gap between the super rich and the rest of us. As Paul Krugman has written,

Over the past 30 years most people have seen only modest salary increases: the average annual salary in America, expressed in 1998 dollars (that is, adjusted for inflation), rose from \$32,522 in 1970 to \$35,864 in 1999. That's about a 10 percent increase over 29 years -- progress, but not much. Over the same period, however, according to Fortune magazine, the average real annual compensation of the top 100 C.E.O.'s went from \$1.3 million -- 39 times the pay of an average worker -- to \$37.5 million, more than 1,000 times the pay of ordinary workers.”¹¹

Since Krugman wrote these words five years ago, the phenomenon he was describing has grown more extreme. It seems quite widely agreed that, as Krugman's tone implies, there is something objectionable about this, and it seems to be widely thought to be objectionable *because* of the inequality involved. The question is why this is so.

Even if this class of super rich people may live in a style very different from the rest of us, this does not give us grounds for feeling humiliated, or inferior, or ashamed of our more modest ways of life. So inequality of status is not the main issue. We might say instead that this level of inequality is objectionable because it will, at least over time, undermine equality of opportunity, and also because it gives these people unacceptable political power in the form of ability to buy influence by giving large contributions to political candidates and parties. These things may well be true. But I doubt that they support the thought that there is something particularly objectionable about recent increases in inequality resulting from higher levels of executive compensation. Equality

¹¹ New York Times Magazine, October 20, 2003

of opportunity was seriously undermined by the much smaller differences in income and wealth that existed at the beginning of the period Krugman describes, and increases in the incomes of the rich since that time do not seem to make that situation worse—there is a limit to the amount of money you can spend to give your children a leg up. Worries that these increases in inequality undermine political fairness may be more germane, but, again, this does not seem anything new.

One possible response would be to say that insofar as even extreme inequalities did not give rise to the problems I have listed—problems of status, domination, or harms to the fairness of political and economic institutions—there would be no objection to them *purely on grounds of inequality*: when they do not have these costs, inequality in income and wealth have been rendered “harmless.” This may be the view that people take of inequality created by the wealth of entertainment and sports figures. But there seems to be something more objectionable in the case of C.E.O.s.

One possible ground for this might be the thought that these executives are gaining something they do not deserve at the expense of the workers in their firms. The underlying idea might then be something like Rawls’s assumption about the (equal, or at least not *grossly* unequal) claims of those whose cooperation goes into producing a good. This may be part of it, but we do not have similar feelings about the relation between the income of film stars and that of the grips and best boys who are listed in the credits at the end (not to mention the truck drivers and so on who are not even listed.) Perhaps we should have such feelings. But I want to conclude by offering a different explanation that would separate these cases to some degree.

This is an objection to the pay of some C.E.O.s that is not an objection to inequality per se, but rather to the process that yields it. Film stars and sports figures are at least earning their pay in what appears to be a genuinely competitive market. The compensation packages of C.E.O.s, on the other hand, are set by compensation committees, composed, one may imagine, of other C.E.O's who are their friends or who at least are driven by some shared idea of what people like them should be paid, rather than by pure market factors. As Walzer says, the gross inequalities that we see around us “derive more significantly from status hierarchies, organizational structures, and power relationships than from the free market.”¹² They are thus instances of what he calls the domination of one sphere by another, and therefore unjust on his account. This is certainly *one* reason why these inequalities are objectionable. Whether there is a further objection to these inequalities *qua inequalities*, beyond the objections I have so far identified and the ones that Walzer mentions, remains to my mind an important open question.

¹² *Spheres of Justice*, p. 117.